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When Kennedy called Khrushchev's bluff

This is the second in a series of pieces on the Sixties. Victor Marchetti, who left the CIA in 1969, is coauthor of "The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence" and author of "Rope-Dancer," a fictionalized version of life at the CIA.

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I was working in the Office of Current Intelligence, one of the CIA's research and analysis centers, and had been watching Cuba for some time. We were distressed by its growing military capabilities and the economic assistance which the Soviets were providing, yet we would have argued against the Bay of Pigs invasion. But nobody asked our advice until it was too late. Now the Cuban government was convinced that the United States was intent on destroying it.

It was my opinion that Castro was not a Communist, but was being driven into the arms of the Soviet Union by the ham-handed activities of the Kennedy Administration.

Our office first became aware of an unprecedented military buildup in Cuba during the summer of 1962. Various technical and research methods (none of which, incidentally, bore any similarity to Leon Uris' spy novel "Topaz") indicated that there were frequent shipments of arms to Cuba. The Air Force and the Navy photographed ships sailing from Soviet military ports to confirm the analysis.

Another fellow and I had invented an esoteric art we called "crate-ology" — crate, as in large boxes. Nobody had any faith in it except us, but we could examine photographs of crates and make pretty good estimates of what was inside. We thought there were bombers, torpedo boats and the like being delivered by Soviet ships.

For more than a year the warhawks in the Pentagon had been screaming that there were missiles in Cuba. They were hysterical and deliberately manipulated information to justify action against Castro. At the time the charges were false, and I spent at least half of each day disproving them.

But by the latter part of August, we became disturbed by the military buildup, so we began writing top-secret reports to the director of the agency. We said that we'd never seen anything comparable and that we didn't know what it meant. As far as we could tell, the equipment was largely defensive — land armaments, motor torpedo boats and fighter aircraft — but some of the weapons could be considered offensive, like the Ilyushin bombers.

Ironically, the warhawks remained strangely unexcited, and Pentagon agencies like the National Security Agency and the Defense Intelligence Agency began publishing evaluations contradicting our findings. They claimed that the assistance being shipped to Cuba was largely for agricultural and economic purposes. Their position was ridiculous in view of the facts. We were watching boatloads of young Soviets arriving in Cuba wearing only two kinds of sports shirts; it smelled of an unsophisticated Soviet attempt to introduce military personnel.

Fortunately for us, John McCone, then director of the agency, saw some value in our reports. He was briefed and our arcane art of crate-ology was explained and he accepted it as a valuable analytic tool, However, when McCone requested briefings from the crate-ologists, the CIA hierarchy raised its ugly head.

Instead of reporting directly to McCone, I had to brief one of my superiors and he would report to McCone. He would be ushered into McCone's office while I waited outside. Every time McCone had a question my boss would run out, get my answer and then run back in. But because of our reports McCone began to suspect the unthinkable.

In 1962 no reasonable person believed that the Soviets would introduce nuclear missiles into Cuba. We had them outgunned 10 to one in strategic strike capabilities. Khrushchev was under pressure from his political opponents and the Soviet hawks to do something about

There was no longer any doubt that Cuba was to be a base for strategic missiles. The entire United States, except for a small corner of northwest Washington state, was vulnerable.